

Duvalier, Trump and Democracy on the Defense

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WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because overlooking Trump's assaults on core American institutions, especially the judiciary and the media, would be utter folly.

We're proud to feature a vibrant collection of voices from across the political spectrum. Today: OZY's Pooja Bhatia argues that the president could inflict long-lasting damage on American democracy.

"It's like you have this macabre leader still laughing at us," she said. "It's like a bad, bad joke."

The civil-society leader was talking mostly about Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier, who had been dead way, way longer than most Haitians had been alive. In fact, an entire generation had come of age since his *son* was deposed. Still, my interviewee insisted, matter-of-fact in her despair: Papa Doc retained a fiendish, beyond-the-grave hold on Haiti — from its institutions to public discourse to individual psyches. The country was stuck in a cycle of endless tragedy, as Papa Doc watched. "I really believe that, in a way, we're still under Duvalier today," she said. "We're still under his regime — and he has won in many ways."

Sounds like magical realism, but she was speaking of concrete things, of the long-term effects a dictator can have. While much of the rest of the world focused on Papa Doc's freakishness — his cartoonish black suit and thick-framed glasses — Duvalier was going about destroying and hamstringing anything that could check his power: dissent, rivals, the legislature, private gatherings. He shut down newspapers and imprisoned and tortured journalists; he arrested union leaders; he banned the Boy Scouts. Duvalier shut down the university system — and then reopened it in a way that gave him firmer control. Without any countervailing institutions, the reasoning went, the dictator could speak directly to the people he claimed to embody.

The half life of institutional ruination can be terribly long. Much of the country's best and brightest died, cooperated, fled or completely removed themselves from civic life. Even by 2011, when I had this conversation, you still couldn't get a degree in history from a Haitian university, my interviewee told me. Papa Doc preferred his own version of the historical record.

Here in the United States, we're thankfully a very long way from the terror of a Duvalier, and suggesting otherwise would be stupid. Not all authoritarians are the same, and, of course, our institutions are much more robust than they were in Haiti circa 1957. Still, overlooking President Donald Trump's assaults on core American institutions, especially the judiciary and the media, would be utter folly. If Trump continues on the path of his first four weeks in office, he will inflict long-lasting, serious damage on our democracy, potentially for generations to come.



Francois Duvalier posing for a portrait on February 20, 1969, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Source *Santi Visalli/Getty*

On Thursday, Trump lied at a press conference, which would be bad enough, except that on Friday, he took to Twitter to declare *The New York Times* and other media organizations “the enemy of the people,” peddlers of “fake news.” Ten days before that, he urged supporters to blame the judge who struck down his immigration ban for any impending terror attacks. Before that were his baseless statements about voter fraud, the alleged breadth of which was apparently calculated to cover the gap by which he lost the popular vote. The pattern is clear: There is one version of the truth, and it is Trump’s. Rather, it’s whatever Trump’s version of truth is at that moment.

Assuming it doesn’t get worse — and by worse, I mean, generally, state-incited violence against judges and journalists — the opposition still has a lot of work to do. It must play defense against his assaults on democratic institutions. Outrage, and even marches and hashtags, don’t exactly sway centrists to its side. It has to find a way to frame its defense of democratic institutions as something all Americans can and should get behind.

And in tandem with that, those in the #NotMyPresident camp must recognize that Trump is not an aberration. He is surely bizarre, with his late-night tweetstorms and mid-day rants. He is disruptive, putting showmanship above protocol. But Trump is not an aberration. Like Duvalier, Trump is the outcome of structural forces and policy choices that have over decades widened inequality. It’s well past time the Democratic establishment paid attention to his constituency. If not, Trump could be laughing at them, and everyone else, from the grave.

Pooja Bhatia

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